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Falling Oil Prices May Lessen Terrorism

The Arab oil sheiks' priorities are shifting like the desert sands, and that's bad news for terrorists, according to State Department intelligence analysts. The connection between falling oil prices and a squeeze on international terrorism has been a long time coming, but these experts think it has finally begun to take shape. In a nutshell, the Arab countries that have, willingly or not, supported the depredations of terrorist groups for decades have decided they have other priorities.

As one State Department source observed to our associate Lucette Lagnado, "The sugar daddies are running out of sugar."

Libya is the most obvious example. "Libya is a basket case," the source said. While Muammar Qaddafi's anti-Western fervor may not have slackened a bit, his drastically shrunken oil revenues have made a shambles of the Libyan economy. So he can no longer shell out millions to every terrorist gang that seeks his help in overthrowing a government or merely spreading panic.

Farther east, Persian Gulf oil countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have begun to resist paying "protection money" to that other godfather of terrorism, Syrian President Hafez Assad. For years, the Gulf states have helped keep Assad in power with hundreds of millions of dollars, in the hope that he will leave them alone. Assad, in turn, has bestowed his largess on the worst collection of terrorist cutthroats ever assembled in one country.

Kuwait decided last summer to cut its subsidies

to Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Until recently, the Saudis were afraid to cross Assad. And the oil billions were rolling in, so it was a small matter to pay him off. But now, faced with their dwindling oil income, the Saudis have apparently decided they can do without the luxury of subsidizing Syria. In fact, some sources report that the Saudis have reduced their payments to Assad "significantly."

"The Saudis are usually afraid of anyone," a Foggy Bottom source said. "But now it is the Syrians who are worried about offending their patrons."

While the amount of money given directly to terrorist groups by Saudi Arabia is relatively modest, the payments to Syria have been significant over the years. Assad, even more vulnerable financially than Qaddafi, may find he needs his Persian Gulf patrons more than they need him.

Under the Dome: House committee members recently got a graphic illustration of the Social Security "notch" and the unfairness it causes. The notch is the difference in benefits received by people born between 1917 and 1921 compared with other retirees. On average, the unlucky ones draw \$124 a month less.

The notch, which affects an estimated 10 million Americans, was created inadvertently in 1977, when Congress enacted amendments intended to correct existing flaws in the Social Security benefit formulas. Legislation to scotch the notch has been introduced by Rep. Edward R. Roybal (D-Calif.).